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Citation for published version:

Kumarasingham, H 2018, 'Liberal ideals and the politics of decolonisation', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 46, no. 5, pp. 815-820. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1519250>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/03086534.2018.1519250](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1519250)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History on 16/10/2018, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03086534.2018.1519250>.

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Special Issue

Liberal Ideals and the Politics of Decolonisation

H. Kumarasingham

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed some of the British Empire's most creative and contradictory political manoeuvres. Creative in that it employed multiple reforms, policies and techniques to extend its influence while ceding power as its ability to impose itself shrank. Contradictory in that while it attempted to dismantle an empire and build a commonwealth of self-governing states it also wanted to maintain, if not strengthen, a liberally led and light-touch dominion over the world it once ruled. The rhetoric of Britain's political liberalism rung everywhere from legislative council chambers and Colonial Office memoranda to youth clubs and debating societies. Just as Britain's stance was perplexing and far from uniform in its political attitude towards the Empire and Commonwealth so indeed were the positions and feelings of the ruled. Could colonial masters become equals with those they once ruled united by political and liberal ideals? Or did political emancipation require political maturity, which could not be given, but only learned. Could the tenets of British liberalism be extended to regions and societies whose members would have been blackballed from the hallowed Reform Club? Responsible Government meant what and to whom? Could the guardianship of countless minorities be surrendered to the slick new sahibs? Would the political ideology and institutions of Westminster be sufficient, let alone appropriate, to the tasks facing governments and societies that were simultaneously familiar and removed from London?

At no time were these issues more apparent than in the drama of what became known as the decolonization of the British Empire in the twentieth century. Questions arose that proved difficult to answer. Even when solutions might be found their reason and reach might give limited alleviation or even provoke political contretemps and violence. Political liberalism across the British Empire and Commonwealth drifted on an inclement sea uncertain of its bearings and often imprudent in its anchorage. However, political liberalism of the British variety in the Empire-Commonwealth, was no passing fad. Since at least the 1897 Diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria,

an event Max Beloff believed trumpeted Britain's 'liberal empire', the quest across the Empire was for political liberalism and to share in the responsibility and mantle of government – more often than not within the British orbit. Constitutions, institutions, royal commissions, memorials, treaties, ritual, travel, literature, art and the establishment of societies, clubs and educational centres all promoted the ideals of political liberalism. As the Conservative M.P. E. F. L. Wood (the future viceroy of India and Earl of Halifax) said in a 1922 report on political development in the Caribbean, which otherwise would have been gloomy reading for those seeking independence, the British territories in the region possessed 'not a few individuals of somewhat exceptional capacity and intelligence' despite there being 'Great blocks of it [which] are backwards and politically undeveloped'. Nonetheless he continued 'We shall be wise if, with these facts before us, we make steps to build upon the foundation of the remarkable loyalty to the Throne' and....

avoid the mistake of endeavouring to withhold a concession ultimately inevitable until it has been robbed by delay of most of its usefulness and of its grace.¹

Fifty years later, just months before Jamaican independence in 1962, one of the island's leading political lights, Norman Manley famously proclaimed words which link with Wood's and with the association British political liberalism held for those like him.

I make no apology for the fact that we did not attempt to embark upon any original or novel exercise in constitutional building Let us not make the mistake of describing as colonial, institutions which are part and parcel of the heritage of this country. If we have any confidence in our own individuality and our own personality, we would absorb these things and incorporate them into our own use as part of the heritage we are not ashamed of. I am not ashamed of any institution which exists in this country merely because it derives from England.²

Characteristic of such statements like Manley's is the sentiment that for political liberalism of the British variety to work effectively trust and delegation would need to be conceded to indigenous leadership. A way of advocating this path seen across the colonial world was to appeal to the "Throne" of Wood's report and send into sharp relief the inadequacy or worse of the British administration and social presence in their territories. As ever, there was an eloquent demonstration to condemn the Colonial government's injurious propensity to abjure the principles local elites considered intrinsic to British governance and their rights as subjects of the Crown.

In 1890 one of Ceylon's leading political grandees, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, authored a memorandum to Queen Victoria, outlining in great detail on behalf of the Ceylon Political Association, the 'invasion of the rights of Your Majesty's Legislative Council on the Island on the part of some Governors'. Ramanathan believed that the Queen's indigenous subjects deserved better and

should be allowed to at least enjoy the privileges of the existing constitution according to the intention of its beneficent founders without interference on the part of some Governors who believe in the expediency of mild despotism.³

Civis Britannicus sum was something that fuelled such beliefs. It was not just for the English. Instead national leaders from General Hertzog to Gandhi believed, when it suited their aims, that their position and community should not be regarded as, or reduced to, second-class vis-à-vis the English within the British Empire. As late as 1954 a Conservative Minister at the Colonial Office, would tell the House of Commons: 'we can still take pride in the fact that a man can say *Civis Britannicus sum* whatever his colour may be, and we take pride in the fact that he wants and can come to the Mother country'.⁴ However, there lingered, all over a suspicion, often justified that reality meant something else. Liberal political principles did not necessarily mean liberal realities. In this era, as before, countless cases abounded that eroded the constitutional confidence of British and Commonwealth law to protect rights most held as inviolable. Liberal ideals suffered in the face of disenfranchisement of indentured labourers in Asia, Africa, Caribbean and Pacific; miserly and lethargic extension of civil rights across the "old" Dominions; banishment of local leaders from Botswana to Cyprus; the use of state sanctioned torture in East Africa and South East Asia; and of course, statutory racial discrimination most obviously manifested in Apartheid, but also across the Commonwealth from Canada to Ceylon. The New Zealand head of external affairs, Sir Alastair McIntosh, when asked to support a republican India within the Commonwealth by a visiting British Cabinet minister was 'too great a sacrifice' since the 'whole conception of the Commonwealth seemed to be based on the fact of European decent'.⁵ In Britain itself, less than a decade after the minister extolled the virtues of British rights across the Empire-Commonwealth in 1954 his government curtailed those principles and circumscribed *civis* with the Commonwealth Immigrants 1962, which the Leader of Opposition called 'cruel and brutal anti-colour legislation'⁶ – though Labour when in government two years later went on to add further restrictions. Liberalism was always a selective tool. For example, liberalism, like all ideals, could also imply an impatience with many attributes of freedom such as a critical press. General Templer in 1953 was

perturbed by the media's potential for 'undesirable influence' on local students in Malaya along with the invasive bogey of communism. Templer 'raised the wider question of the influence of the Press on the political development of Malaya. He deplored the influence of the "Singapore Standard" with its doctrinaire left-wing views. What the country needed was a newspaper that would preach the gospel of decent Liberalism and good government'.⁷ Liberalism, of course, could be used as an evocation by those who were acting contrary to the conception being extended to crucial segments of population. In late 1947 another British soldier, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, wrote that the Africa was continent full of exciting opportunity, but could not left to the African who was 'a complete savage'. Instead tough liberalism meant policies were required over the objections of those in Britain who will think 'that the African will suffer in the process'. British interests and imported 'brains and go-getters' were required to develop the region. Invoking Cecil Rhodes he stated

We must face up to the problems now; they will be far more difficult if left for our children.

The plain truth is that these lands must be developed in order that Britain may survive.⁸

To such like statements, which were common, can be what C.A. Bayly called a different liberalism – that of contradicting Britain. Indians (but applicable to other non-Britons within the Empire), 'refused to accept that the principle of liberty did not apply to them because they were 'barbarians' and consequently, like children, in need of direction by benign imperial authority'. Instead they drew not only on British political liberalism as evidently within their capability, but also their own civilisational values that asserted India's manifest liberal character and consequent candidature for self-government.⁹ The post-independence period would challenge these ideals too.

This special issue probes these issues surrounding the politics and culture of liberalism in the Empire-Commonwealth during the twentieth century, especially concerning decolonization. While there has been growing interest in liberalism and empire there still remains more to be investigated. This special issue is especially interested in the political historical and constitutional elements of political liberalism. Sarah Stockwell looks at the contradictions and causes of the British liberal tradition during the decolonisation of Africa – a continent that experienced a bewildering array of liberal and illiberal policies while Lorna Lloyd will explore Britain's response to India's attack on South Africa's racial policies at the United Nations, the outcome of long-anxious relations between South Africa and India whose respective liberal and political visions were often in conflict, but also full of nuance and paradox. A common theme throughout this

issue is importance of personal factors and relations to the reception and style of political liberalism. Derek O'Brien examines the historical and legal aspect of the Caribbean's relationship with the Crown and Courts and how this has affected political options and discourse. Brant Muscovitch examines the educational and the ideological impact of socialism on liberal ideals for those seeking to break the imperial yoke while Peter Catterall continues this theme by explaining the Labour Party's difficulty to adjusting from Empire to Commonwealth in those critical years following the end of the second world war. For many being a citizen of empire was the highest liberal honour, for others still it was a mark of servitude to a foreign power. Using the crucial period around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth Mark Frost looks at 'loyal dissent' and the frustrations of waiting for liberal ideals to translate into political realities. Hana Qugana and Simon Layton search for the essence of social groups that challenged the cultural and liberal pretensions of the British Empire such as the Kibbo Kift. It has been considerable time since a constitutional analysis of the decolonisation of the British Empire has been undertaken. H. Kumarasingham will survey the importance of Commonwealth constitutional history to the discipline of history and to the liberal political project that underwrote much of it. Together this special issue attempts to emulate C.A. Bayly and explore aspects of the liberal ideal and political experiences in areas either previously unfamiliar or overlooked. The 20th century British Empire-Commonwealth holds a captivating period to traverse the many roads and ravines that liberal ideals ran, and stunted, with enduring consequence.

Acknowledgements

The articles in this special issue "**Liberal Ideals and the Politics of Decolonisation**" are the result of a workshop held in Colombo in December 2015. I would like record thanks to Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, Dr Asanga Welikala and their colleagues at the Centre for Policy Alternatives for helping make possible a stimulating academic event. Sir Christopher A. Bayly was to have delivered the keynote for the workshop comparing the liberalism and politics of the independence leaderships of South Asia and East Africa. His death in April 2015 robbed us of a mentor, scholar and friend. This special issue which has his ideas weaved, naturally, within it is dedicated to his lasting memory with gratitude for his timeless work and scholarly span that has influenced us all.

¹ 'Report of the Hon. E. F. L. Wood, M. P., on His Visit to the West Indies and British Guiana, December 1921 to February 1922', HMSO: Cmnd. 1679/1922

² As quoted in Norman Girvan, 'Assessing Westminster in the Caribbean: then and now, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2015, p 97

³ 'Memorandum on the Reform of the Constitution, presented to Her Majesty Queen Victoria on 10 February, 1890, by the Honourable P. Ramanathan, C.M.G., M.L.C.', Appendix in M. Vythilingam, *The Life of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan*, vol. 1, Colombo: Ramanathan Commemoration Society, 1971, pp 587-588

⁴ Henry Hopkinson quoted in Andrew S. Thompson, 'Empire and the British State', in Sarah Stockwell (ed.), *The British Empire – Themes and Perspectives*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, p 55

⁵ H. Kumarasingham, *Onward with Executive Power – Lessons from New Zealand 1947-57*, Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington/Institute of Policy Studies, 2010, pp 26-27

⁶ Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, vol. II, London: Macmillan, 1989, p 423

⁷ Templer had been accused in the British Press of running a 'Police State'. 'Minutes by R. L. Baxter and T. C. Jerrom on discussions with Sir G. Templer and Sir D. MacGillivray on 11 and 14 November 1953', CO 1022/85, no 36, 18 November 1953, document 309 in A. J. Stockwell (ed.), *British Documents on the End of Empire (BDEEP), Malaya, Part III*, London: HMSO, 1995, pp 13-16

⁸ 'Memorandum by Field Marshal Lord Montgomery, "Tour in Africa, Nov-Dec 1947", 19 December 1947, DO 35/2380, no. 1, document 104, in Ronald Hyam (ed.), *BDEEP, The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945-1951, Part II*, pp 188-193

⁹ C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties – Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp 13-18

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